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Feathers and Hair

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FARIDEH DAYANIM GOLDIN

FEATHERS AND HAIR

Plucking chickens the kosher way is quite an art. According to the laws of *kashrut*, a chicken should not be cooked or even brought close to a source of heat until it is *kashered*—bled, salted, and rinsed. The use of fire to sear feathers or hot water to loosen quills is absolutely forbidden. Poultry processors today use the force of air to pluck feathers for kosher markets; but when I lived in Iran, during the '60s and '70s, this job had to be done manually.

Chickens were brought to the women of a household right after the chickens were slaughtered, which usually happened in the backyard. For each chicken, the *shohed* recited the requisite *bracha*, plucked a patch of feathers from underneath the chicken's neck, pulled back its head, and slit its throat. He then threw the chicken on the grass to do its dance of death, banging itself against the thorny rose bushes. The chickens were still warm when we started to pluck them.

The largest surface of a chicken carcass has fine feathers that are easy to pull. On rare occasions, when there were more than the one or two chickens customary for *Shabbat* or holidays, I

could get a rhythm going and clean the chickens quite fast. The larger feathers, however, are embedded deep in the flesh and were difficult to pluck—particularly the wings, where the skin was delicate and tore easily. The fatty backside of a chicken was even worse: The long quills pulled out fat and blood, making everything greasy and sticky. Fine feathers clung to my hands, arms, legs, and clothes wherever the fat splattered. Worse yet, the quills often broke. To pull them out, I had to trap the embedded pieces between the edge of a small knife and my thumb, being careful not to cut my finger. My mother, like other adult women, seldom worried about cutting herself. Her hands were already rough from housework, so the knife made small dents on her thick calluses, but rarely drew blood.

Weddings, especially, tested our chicken-cleaning skills. Since we had no refrigeration back then, “pluckers” had to clean and cook a large pile of chickens quickly, leaving little time to clean up and get dressed for the wedding party. I must have set a record cleaning chickens for my cousin Ziba’s wedding. Hired cooks boiled water in industrial-sized pots on top of wood-burning mud stoves, impatiently waiting for the chickens. Burlap bags of Basmati rice (which, weeks earlier, we had cleaned of pebbles, incidental grains of legumes, mung beans, wheat, and sometimes a dead beetle or two) were already triple-washed and ready to be boiled in salted water, steamed, and mixed with fava beans, herbs, barberries, pistachios, saffron, and carrots.

A few men from the bride’s and groom’s families gathered with the rabbi in a secluded room on the second floor to negotiate and argue the terms of my cousin’s wedding contract: the amount of the *mehrich* and the dowry. Once in a while, the dispute became heated, and a man from this or that side of the

family left the negotiating table in protest, announcing that the wedding was off.

Women stopped their work until another man came to appease the disgruntled one, convincing him to rejoin the negotiations. Then the women went on with their own preparations, dividing into two groups. The first, the more prestigious family members and guests—my grandmother, the mothers of the bride and groom, some aunts, and many known women of the community—were led to a room decorated for a pre-wedding party, replete with large pillows on the Persian carpets, to lean against while sitting cross-legged on the floor. Some of my female cousins were given trays of sweets, limeade, and *sharbat* to pass around. Bags of *noghl* were placed around the room for the women to munch on and to shower the bride with, as they covered their mouths with their *chadors* and ululated, *Kililili!*

The second group of women—including my mother, my sister, myself, the washer-woman, and her daughter—sat outside on low stools in the brick-paved backyard, cleaning mounds of chickens. I sat by the dead chickens, angry, resentful, and hurt for being excluded from the party room, missing whatever was going on in there. But I kept my feelings to myself. Good girls did not complain.

My mother was born in Hamedan, far from my father's hometown of Shiraz. Being a woman, and born at a time of oppression and extreme poverty for most Iranian Jews, my mother had been of no use to her parents, just another mouth to feed. In addition to worrying about the harshness of their own lives, my grandparents worried that my mother could get raped or kidnapped by anti-Semitic hoodlums in her city of birth. Before

reaching puberty, when my mother was barely thirteen years old, my grandparents gave their only daughter away to my father, whom they had met for the first time just a few weeks earlier, when he had knocked at their door to ask for my mother's hand in marriage. He took her away to live with his family, at a time when traveling was time-consuming, expensive, and arduous. Throughout her marriage, having no family for protection, my mother remained an outsider in my father's family—a lonely and silent woman.

My mother's problems were not just her own. As I grew older, being her first child and being female, my fate became increasingly connected to hers. Repeatedly, just like my mother, I felt as if I were a stranger among my own family, as if I were still covered by the amniotic fluid that had protected me in my mother's womb—a fluid that no longer offered me warmth and safety. Instead, its old stench kept me at a distance from my cousins, who should have been my equals, my pals.

Noticing the look of disappointment on my face as she gave me the job, my grandmother said that it was a *mitzvah* to pluck chickens for a wedding, and that it would bring me good luck, a good husband. But her words did not keep me from hating the hard, dirty work. I knew that by the time the chickens were feathered, gutted, and cleaned, I would be covered in chicken feathers, fat, blood, and excrement, and I would smell like them, too.

I had finished plucking my third bird and was reaching toward the mound of white, orange, and black feathers for my fourth, when I noticed the *band andaz* entering the hallway, a small basket of thread in one hand and a colorful *chador* around her face, held by the other hand. She entered the room with much pomp and circumstance, let go of her body covering in

the presence of the women, cupped her mouth and ululated, *Kililili!* Her arrival sent a wave of loud ululation from the party room towards us. We imitated the women's cries of joy like an echo, as we plucked away.

I had seen this woman before. I had watched her hold one end of a piece of string between her teeth and loop the other end, putting it next to a woman's face, legs, or arms and pulling it, swiftly removing hair. Body hair was an obsession not only with the Jews, but with most Iranians. Middle Eastern women tend to have dark and sometimes abundant body hair, the growth and darkening of which is often synonymous with the loss of childhood beauty and innocence. Its removal makes women more appealing to Iranian men—especially in that generation, whose men preferred younger women. My cousin Ziba had some facial hair close to her hairline. I knew the *band andaz* was going to make her face smooth and her legs soft.

I kept plucking away at the chickens, all the while listening to the noises from the party room. The ululation continued, and occasionally I heard a subdued moan from my cousin, when a particularly stubborn hair was pulled. We were almost to the end of the pile of chickens when we heard heart-wrenching screams from Ziba. Even the loud ululation could not muffle them. I was horrified and poised to jump off my stool to run and help my cousin, but my mother pulled me down with a knowing smile on her face. What was happening? I dared not ask. My mother and the rest of the women in my group joined in drowning out Ziba's cries by adding their own sounds of ululation.

I had been taught that *najeeb* girls, decent and modest young women, could not ask questions; we had to be *sharm-roo*, quiet and bashful. I had learned to watch and listen quietly,

in the hope that information would come along voluntarily. This time, I did not have to wait long. My mother left briefly to fetch water to spray the feathers, to keep them from flying. One of the cleaning women, who obviously was from the "lower class" and did not have our upper-class inhibitions, bent toward me. Using a derogatory word, she whispered, "They are doing her private parts!" She then giggled hysterically, covering her mouth with her feather-laden hand.

There I was plucking chickens, while the hierarchy of the community was plucking my cousin's pubic hair! I could not get the humiliating image out of my mind: Ziba with her legs spread in front of all those women modestly covered in *chadors*, while someone plucked hair from a part of her body that was so private we were not even allowed to name it. Angry, afraid, and worried about Ziba, I plucked recklessly, ruining the skin of the next few chickens.

I had seen the *band andaz* at work on women's faces, legs, and arms. I had seen naked bodies of married women with shaven private parts at the *hamam*, the public baths. Neither vision had disturbed me. What frightened me was the public spectacle of this pre-wedding ceremony, which to me signified a woman's loss of self-determination and control over her own destiny. This initiation into the culture of female conformity horrified me, although it delighted the other women. I was only fourteen, a year older than my mother at her wedding, and three years younger than Ziba. Instead of accepting the custom as a wonderful show of support and camaraderie, as other women were doing, I felt lost. I worried that my life would spin out of my control as I grew older.

A few weeks later, I asked Ziba about the event. "It hurt like

nothing I have ever experienced,” she replied. “Even the *band andaz* said she had never seen anyone bleed so badly!” Ziba spoke with a pride I could not understand. For years, the experience stayed on the surface of my consciousness, rarely leaving me during my daily activities. Why, I would wonder, did Ziba’s mother and grandmother allow the ceremony? Did they not have the same experience? How could they watch her in so much pain? How could they allow the humiliation?

The answer sank in slowly and bitterly, throughout the years I lived in Iran: My mother was dragging me down with her, into a dark abyss. All mothers, in fact, were dragging down their daughters. I felt appalled and horrified thinking of Ziba’s mother and grandmother (who was also my grandmother) passing on the customs of torture and degradation to the next generation. *To please whom?* I wondered. I felt hopeless and helpless. I was afraid to discuss my thoughts with anyone—my mother, grandmother, or friends. I felt that the plucking was just a symbol of our mothers subjugating us, the daughters; forcing us to walk in our mothers’ paths, so as to justify what was done to them by their own mothers.

Years later, however, I came to feel that maybe the only power our mothers had was the power to implement the rules of patriarchy. Sympathy replaced my anger, and I even felt respect for our mothers’ zeal to survive.

At the end of the *band andazi* party, my grandmother stopped by to see how the chicken-cleaning had gone. She blessed me, “*Insh’allah nesbatesh be shomas, khoshbakhti, khoobi, khoshi!*” (I pray for the same happiness and good life for you.) And I, who had learned to stay silent, lost control of my tongue. “*Khoda nakoneh!*” I spat. (May it not be God’s will!) In the silence that

followed, looks of horror spread over every face, including that of my father, who had just walked over to check on us.

A daughter's wedding day is the ultimate desire for Iranian Jewish parents. I knew I did not want it, not this way. But which way? I did not know. I recognized myself as an oddity, an irregular, a loner, a defiant girl. My heart went out to my parents, knowing that I was an embarrassment and an outsider. I felt frightened, not knowing what was going to become of me. What, after all, can become of one who does not belong, who loathes and rejects the customs?

At my cousin's wedding, I did not know if I could ever find the courage and determination to defy the standards of life for a Jewish woman from a small town in Iran. Not being able to fight the traditions, the *band andazi* being just a small example, I left the country in 1975, four years before an Islamic revolution made life for women and Jews even more unbearable than it already had been.

A decade after my cousin's wedding, I married my Ashkenazi husband in the United States I so desperately wanted to distance myself from my past, my culture, and my country of birth that I eliminated even the smallest trace of my own heritage from the ceremony. I walked down the aisle American style. The chickens were not plucked by anyone I knew; they did not even look like birds. Breast of chicken stuffed with wild rice was on the reception menu, not Iranian stew made with chopped herbs; not aromatic rice topped with crusty, saffron-colored *tadig*. The music my fiancé and I selected had an Eastern European flavor. With one exception, none of my Iranian aunts living in the United States attended the wedding to sing *vasoonak* for me, the traditional Shirazi Jewish wedding songs.

My wedding was Ashkenazi American, all the way. If I have any regret about my wedding day, as beautiful as it was, it is the fact that I allowed my fear of and disgust with some customs to erase all the others.

My grandmother came from Iran a few days before the wedding. She brought her *ghalyoun* (waterpipe) and Iranian tobacco. She sat cross-legged on the floor and sipped hot tea flavored with fresh mint, a sugar lump in the back of her cheek. She took a puff on her waterpipe and entertained her hybrid American grandchildren with the gurgle of the water at its base. The men ran inside for their cameras.

While the men were gone, my grandmother put her lips to my aunt's ear, signaled toward me, and in a loud whisper asked, "Has she taken care of the stuff?" Initially, I did not understand what she meant, but when I realized the meaning of her words, a rush of blood shot through my body like a jolt of lightning. The memory of my cousin's wedding flooded my mind with a momentary feeling of despair and disbelief. How could I have forgotten?

I composed myself, and with a smile, replied, "Yes, definitely." And in a small voice she could not hear, I added, "For generations to come."